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SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUMBLATT AND HAMADEH ON INDEPENDENT BLOC
FORMATION, BALANCING SYRIA

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and March 14 MP Marwan Hamadeh discussed ongoing negotiations for election blocs and contentious cabinet atmospherics during dinner with the Ambassador on November 8. Jumblatt said he planned to offer his own national defense strategy during the next National Dialogue session if March 14 cannot agree to present a unified proposal for the coalition. Hamadeh believed Sleiman had tacitly agreed to back an independent list, but also expressed concern about how to ensure independent candidates remain independent after the election. Hamadeh described Sunni leader Saad Hariri's outreach to the Armenian Tashnaq party and negotiations with former Prime Minister Najib Mikati. Hamadeh also relayed to the Ambassador and Jumblatt independent MP Michel Murr's maneuvering with former President Amine Gemayel. Jumblatt stressed the need for continued Arab and international involvement in Lebanon as a counterweight to Syria, and Hamadeh noted that Lebanese leaders should travel to Damascus only to discuss the technical matters of their portfolios. Jumblatt said he was still unsure about meeting with Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and had not yet moved to set up the exchange. He also floated the idea of March 14 "flirting" with Nabih Berri to wean support from Hizballah. End summary.

MARCH 14 OR JUMBLATT STRATEGY AT NEXT DIALOGUE SESSION

2. (C) In a November 8 meeting with the Ambassador and March 14 MP Marwan Hamadeh, Druze leader Jumblatt said Michel Aoun's national defense strategy, presented at the November 11 National Dialogue session, had been lifted directly from a June 2007 article by Hizballah deputy Naim Kassem on the need to transform all of Lebanon's territory into the resistance. Jumblatt prepared a defense strategy as part of Lebanon's 2006 National Dialogue, and he plans to offer another updated version in response to Aoun's proposal. Jumblatt prefers a March 14 common draft but said coalition members had not discussed the idea; if they cannot agree before the next Dialogue session on December 22, Jumblatt will present a separate strategy. Marwan Hamadeh noted that Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea had "his own ideas" about the defense strategy that would have to be incorporated into a common March 14 vision. Hamadeh said National Dialogue participants had not yet engaged in serious dialogue on this matter and it

would take time before meaningful discussions occurred.

¶3. (C) Regarding participation of the National Dialogue, Jumblatt thought President Sleiman, potentially squeezed by Hizballah, was still inclined to expand membership. However, Jumblatt said he had told an envoy sent by President Sleiman to see him earlier in the day to gauge political opinions on the issue that National Dialogue expansion would be unhelpful.

HAMADEH AND JUMBLATT ON MARCH 14 STRATEGY, INDEPENDENTS

¶4. (C) According to Hamadeh, who said he had met with Defense Minister Elias Murr until two o'clock that morning, the Defense Minister's father, Michel Murr, had told Sleiman he must "not be like the former President," referring to former Lebanese President Emile Lahoud. Murr told Sleiman he should be a "real" president and form a small electoral bloc of his own. Michel Murr believed Sleiman, through an independent list, could play the role of an arbiter and prevent a collision course between March 14 and March 8. Minister Elias Murr told Hamadeh that Sleiman seemed amenable to forming a list; Sleiman reportedly told Michel Murr he would ask advisor Nazem Khoury to resign and run as the independent candidate in Jbeil. Hamadeh, however, saw a potential obstacle to the President's independent bloc in the attitudes of March 14 Christians; he said Geagea does not like the idea and former President Amine Gemayel was "quiet" on the issue. He also said Sleiman must be sure the independent bloc will stay independent. According to Hamadeh, his niece Neyla

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Tueni refused to be part of an independent bloc; she will run as March 14 or she will not run at all. (Note: Nayla is also Michel Murr's grand daughter. End Note.)

¶5. (C) Minister Murr also told Hamadeh his father had agreed with Gemayel on Christian seats in the Metn district. Gemayel would get one seat and the other seat "could be settled with Nassib Lahoud." According to Hamadeh, Murr wants one of the two MP's in Ashrafieh in return. Hamadeh warned, however, to "not count Ashrafieh as a done deal." Additionally, Sunni leader Saad Hariri asked Murr to give Geagea one seat in the upper Metn district, but Murr refused. Minister Murr told Hamadeh the refusal could be retracted if his father determines Geagea has strong support in the district.

¶6. (C) Discussing elections in Tripoli, Jumblatt said Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammed Safadi would run as March 14 in the elections. Hamadeh said Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati was also trying to make an arrangement with Hariri, but Hamadeh assessed that a Mikati-Hariri alliance would not benefit March 14. He said March 14 has a solid bloc in Tripoli currently and Mikati's presence on a March 14 list would weaken the coalition. Hamadeh also said Hariri was close to a deal with the Armenian Tashnaq party although no high-level meeting had occurred. Noting that Speaker Nabih Berri had played a positive role regarding Dialogue expansion, Jumblatt assessed that March 14 should "flirt" with Berri, since he may have trouble in the upcoming elections. Hamadeh believed that Shia of the public sector are still close to Berri; he appointed all the Shia civil servants and thus still retains influence.

¶7. (C) March 14 coalition members hope the announcement of its candidates at its January 14 convention will boost popular support leading up to rallies on February 14 and March 14. Jumblatt and Hamadeh reiterated the need for a March 14 media outlet to improve visibility of coalition activities and messages. Jumblatt thought March 14 needed, in particular, a Christian alternative to Aoun's Orange "O" TV. Due to financial constraints of opening MTV, however, Hamadeh and Jumblatt agreed that trying to work with the Lebanese Broadcasting Company (LBC) was the best option.

Hamadeh said LBC still invites some March 14 guests on its shows, and March 14 should accept all invitations.

¶8. (C) Jumblatt also stressed that March 14 needed to avoid mistakes such as the defeat of the March 14 candidate in the recent Tripoli doctor's syndicate elections. Hamadeh described March 14 victories, announced that day, in student union elections in Tripoli as a positive sign. March 14 won all the seats for Saint George University and Notre Dame University elections in Tripoli and also the Zahle student group race. He said Beirut's student elections were split almost 50-50 with March 8 candidates. March 8 won only Sidon, where they took the Shia vote.

UNPLEASANT CABINET ATMOSPHERICS

¶9. (C) Hamadeh described the contentious atmosphere at cabinet sessions, the most recent of which took place earlier the same day. Minister of Social Affairs Mario Aoun left the meeting after a fight occurred at the Serail gate between his bodyguards and Serail guards. Deputy Prime Minister Issam Abou Jamra, who is boycotting all Cabinet sessions at the PM's office (Grand Serial), did not attend, although he will apparently still attend cabinet sessions held at President Sleiman's Baabda Palace. Jumblatt believed the Cabinet was "cornered" by the Doha Accords, as ministers had agreed to "fix the government" and promised not to resign. Jumblatt described tension between Minister of Transportation and Public Works Ghazi Aridi and Prime Minister Siniora, and Hamadeh said Safadi was also not on good terms with the Prime Minister. Hamadeh thought cabinet sessions would become more difficult as elections approach.

INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON COUNTERS SYRIA

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¶10. (C) Jumblatt argued that continued Arab and international involvement in Lebanon was important, particularly as a counterweight to Syrian influence. He thought Damascus opposed Arab and international involvement in Lebanon for the same reasons -- the purpose of Hamas political chief Khalid Maashal's visit to Lebanon, according to Jumblatt, was to signal, through Lebanon, the cancellation of Palestinian talks in Cairo and Syrian displeasure with growing Egyptian involvement in Lebanese and Palestinian affairs. Jumblatt plans to talk to the French about playing an active role in Lebanon. He said Qatari, Saudi, and Egyptian activities in Lebanon helped balance against Syria.

¶11. (C) However, Jumblatt termed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's comments that UN SYG Ban Ki-Moon and Arab League SYG Amr Musa were unnecessary to Lebanon's National Dialogue as "unhelpful." Commenting on media reports of Sleiman's visit to Egypt, Hamadeh judged Musa had been "put on the shelf for the time-being" in favor of a more active role by Mubarak. Jumblatt said it was dangerous to depict Lebanon as capable of solving all problems on its own, particularly when some issues, such as resolving the status of Sheba'a Farms, required international mediation.

¶12. (C) Hamadeh noted the increasing number of Lebanese leaders "being forced" to visit Damascus. He argued that as long as meetings focused on technical issues, such cooperation was positive. Hamadeh said Defense Minister Murr was still contemplating his invitation to Damascus, since he also wanted to be sure "real" issues, such as smuggling and border coordination, were on top of the agenda, rather than making a "political visit."

¶13. (C) Jumblatt and Hamadeh judged the timing premature for successful indirect Israel-Syria talks and predicted Syria would wait until the new U.S. administration took office in order to curry favor from the U.S. President-elect with the

deal. Jumblatt and Hamadeh opposed talks, direct or indirect, between Israel and Lebanon. Regarding the Middle East policy of the incoming U.S. administration, Jumblatt said the U.S. should engage with Iran and Syria only when conditions are appropriate. Hamadeh said if the U.S. gives Iran or Syria the impression of victory, meaningful discussions will be impossible.

JUMBLATT STILL CONTEMPLATING NASRALLAH MEETING

¶14. (C) Jumblatt, without solicitation, mentioned to the Ambassador the possibility of a meeting between himself and Nasrallah. Jumblatt said he was still "not sure" about how he wanted to proceed. He said he had not been approached by Hizballah contacts to meet Nasrallah and had not yet sought the meeting himself. Jumblatt preferred to meet Nasrallah without a mediator, but if unable, he would select Speaker Nabih Berri over Druze opposition leader Talal Arslan. However, Jumblatt believed Syria would choose the mediator and would want to bestow prestige on Arslan.

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